WILLOW CREEK ALLOTMENT-EAST PASTURE CANAL FENCE
ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT
EA NO. 0R-030-99-014

# I. Introduction

## A. Background

The Willow Creek Allotment (#00105) is located approximately five miles northwest of Vale, Oregon. The exact location of the proposed project is within the East pasture of Willow Creek Allotment (see Map A). Crested wheatgrass (*Agropyron cristatum*), cheatgrass (*Bromus tectorum*), Sandberg's bluegrass (*Poa secunda*), big sagebrush (*Artemisia tridentata*), and bull thistle (*Cirsium vulgare*) dominate the vegetation composition on the low, flat lands. Native bluegrass, bluebunch wheatgrass (*Pseudorogneria spicata*), bottlebrush squirrel tail (*Sitanion histrix*), and sagebrush (*Artemisia tridentata*) dominate the rolling foothills and butte areas to the southwest of the pasture. The area is likely used for deer (*Odocoileus hemionus*) winter range. Access to the area is limited, therefore, little recreational value exists. The soils are associated with the Frohman and Virtue series. Livestock are grazed in a flip-flop system (Attachment A) between the two pastures; East and West. The annual turnout date is dictated by the availability of water in the Vale Main Canal (controlled by Vale Oregon Irrigation District) around April 15. The Allotment Management Plan's (1981) defined grazing system has not been followed in recent years due to a lack of available water. Turnout and off dates, therefore, have annually varied by two weeks.

## B. Purpose and Need of Proposed Project

The only source of water in the East Pasture is supplied by the Vale Main Canal. The canal forms the northern, eastern boundaries of the East Pasture. Agricultural land lies to the north and northeast of the Vale Main Canal lies which cattle enter and damage when water levels are low in the canal, generally later in the season. The trampling of the canal banks by hoof action has also been a problem for the Vale Oregon Irrigation District. The purpose of the proposed fence project is to prevent cattle from escaping the East Pasture by crossing the canal at low water, causing damage to adjacent agricultural land, and trampling the canal banks.

## C. Consistency with Land Use Plans

Actions considered in this environmental assessment (EA) are consistant with decisions in the Ironside Grazing Management Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) and the Ironside Rangeland Program Summary (RPS).

II. Description of Proposed Action and Alternatives

A. Proposed Action

The proposed action is to build approximately 2.25 miles of permanent fence (see MAP A) adjacent to the Vale Main Canal. This fence would form the northern and eastern boundary of the East Pasture of Willow Creek Allotment (#10105). Materials would be provided by the Bureau of Land Management. The operators would construct the fence. The proposed time of construction is the spring of 1999, prior to livestock turnout in the East Pasture (7/1-9/30). Portions of the fence line would be built on Bureau of Reclamation (BOR) land. A notice would be sent to the BOR.

An agreement was developed and signed on October 6, 1998, between the operators and private land owner of the 40 acre parcel within the proposed project route (see case file #363061 & 363057). The agreement states that the operator has permission to construct a fence line through the 40 acres of private ground. The operator will supply the materials and labor for this short fence segment (0.1 miles). The operator will also have maintenance responsibility of the fence.

The proposed fence line would not follow the canal bends. A insignificant amount of the East Pasture, therefore, would be excluded from grazing. The preference for the existing permit would not be altered. Any fence line adjacent to the canal would be built so it does not interrupt the two-track access for canal maintenance.

The fence would meet standard design features (see Attachment B) of a four-strand barbed wire fence which provides for wildlife passage, designed with the top wire set at 40-42 inches above the ground. Smooth wire would be required for the bottom strand at 18 inches above ground level to facilitate pronghorn (*Antilocapra americana*) passage. Rock cribs would be installed to provide brace points for corners and gates. Rock material would be hauled and piled at designated sites (see MAP A). The rock would then be hauled by smaller, lighter equipment to crib locations.

The proposed action includes the development of four stock ponds to be constructed along the proposed fence line. Four ponds are needed for proper distribution of cattle within the pasture. Three ponds are scheduled for completion in the spring of 1999. The last pond will be constructed the following year (2000). The construction of these watering holes will be mostly funded and completed by the Vale Oregon Irrigation District. The operator will supply the pipe. Vale Oregon Irrigation District sent a memo describing the construction of the proposed stock ponds on January 7, 1999 (see case file #363061 & 363057).

The proposed ponds would need between 50-400 yards of soil excavated depending

upon the site. The proposed stock ponds in Township 17 south, Range 44 east, Section 20, 28 and 29 are natural depressions adjacent to the canal. The proposed stock pond in Township 17 south, Range 44 east, Section 34 is less of a natural depression, therefore, it would need 350-400 yards of soil removed. The development would widen the canal bank sufficiently to allow for the proposed fence line construction, and allow safe access of maintenance equipment to the canal. An eight-inch pipe would be installed horizontally through the bank of the canal to each pond approximately one to two feet off the bottom of the canal floor. The largest pond would extend to approximately 100 feet long and 50 feet. Most of the soil would be relocated to the canal bank or smoothed off at the ends of each pond. Three sides of the ponds would be sloped to allow necessary access for cattle. An insignificant amount of soil erosion is anticipated.

Removal of vegetative cover would be restricted along the proposed fence line approximately sixteen feet on either side of the line. A minimal amount of brush removal may be necessary to stretch wire. Disturbance to the surrounding area would be limited to the extent necessary to construct the fence. The construction site would be cleared of all residual materials when completed.

B. No Action

Within this no action alternative the fence would not be constructed and the cattle would subsequently continue to escape the pasture damaging to adjacent agricultural lands, and trampling canal banks.

## III. AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT

### A. Vegetation

The vegetation along the proposed action consists mostly of big sagebrush (*Artemisia tridentata spp.*) with an understory of cheatgrass (*Bromus tectorum*), Sandberg's bluegrass (*Poa secunda*), and other weedy plants such as bull thistle (*Circium vulgare*).

### B. Livestock Grazing

1990 AMP Evaluation Grazing Schedule
Current Grazing Summary

| Pasture | Even Years | Odd Years |
|---|---|---|
| East | 4/21-9/30 | 7/1-9/30 |

(See Attachment A for complete grazing system).

Cattle are usually turned out around April 15 or when water is in the canal. Lack of available water for the cattle has prevented an annual April 1 turnout. Use has been occurring as late as October 15.

C. Recreation and Visual Resources

This area receives limited recreational use in the form of hunting and horseback riding. Otherwise the area has very little recreational value. The proposed project is located in an area designated as a Visual Resource Management Class III. The proposed project will not be visible from Highway 26.

D. Wildlife

Deer (*Odocoileus hemionus*) are the main wildlife in the allotment. The sagebrush hills and draws in East pasture provide cover for the deer during the day. Deer usually feed on the agricultural lands during the night.

E. Cultural Resources

No cultural resources have been found in this area.

F. T & E Species

No threatened or endangered species have been found in this area.

G. Soils

Soil maps show Frohman series and Virtue series dominating the proposed site (Malheur River Drainage Basin. Oregon State Water Resources Board. 1969). Frohman series consists of shallow, well-drained soils derived from thin loess and old alluvium on nearly level to sloping high terraces from 2,300 to 2,700 feet in elevation. The Virtue series consists of moderately deep, well-drained soils derived from old lacustrine and alluvial deposits on terraces from 2,700 to 4,000 feet in elevation.

H. Water Quality

The Vale Main Canal of Vale Oregon Irrigation District is the only water source for the East Pasture. This water is mainly used for crop irrigation on agricultural lands. Trampling of the canal banks has impacted water quality by increasing sediment in the canal water**.**

I. Other Mandatory Elements

| Critical Elements of the Human Environment | YES | NO |
|---|---|---|
| Air Quality | | X |
| ACEC's | X | |
| Farmlands, Prime & Unique | | X |
| Floodplains | | X |
| Native American Religious Concerns | | X |
| Wastes, Hazardous/Solid | | X |
| Wetlands/Riparian Zones | | X |
| Wild & Scenic Rivers | | X |
| Wilderness | | X |

## IV. ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES

### A. Proposed Action

The proposed action would improve livestock management and control in East Pasture. Ultimately, the fence would keep cattle in the pasture eliminating agricultural land and canal damage. Water would be made available to cattle with the development of stock ponds inside the fenceline, but fed by the canal with a buried eight-inch pipe. Water quality within the canal, therefore, would no longer be affected by cattle use in the East Pasture. A minor amount of soil and vegetation disturbance would occur along the fence line as a result of construction and subsequent livestock trailing. Development of the proposed action would solve conflicts between cattle operators in the East Pasture and adjacent landowners. The proposed action would meet VRM Class III objectives.

### B. No Action

Without the development of the proposed action cattle will continue to escape the pasture as water in the canal decreases later in the season. Direct impacts to the public land would not be significant.

## V. PERSONS, ORGANIZATIONS CONSULTED

An environmental assessment (EA) notice will also be published in the local paper for 15 days. Comments will be considered prior to making the decision as to what action will be employed.

## VI. PARTICIPATING STAFF

| | |
|---|---|
| Mark Blackburn | Operator |
| Foy Blackburn | Operator |
| Ron Jacobs | Vale Oregon Irrigation District, District Manager |
| Connie Jensen | Rangeland Management Specialist |
| Jean Findley | District Botanist |
| Al Bammann | Wildlife Specialist |
| Diane Pritchard | Cultural Resources Specialist |
| Shaney Rockefeller | Soil Scientist |

## VII. FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

On the basis of the information contained in the environmental assessment (EA) and all other information available, it is my determination that the proposed action is in conformance with the Ironside EIS and RPS for the area, and does not constitute a major federal action significantly affecting the quality of the human environment and that an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) is not required.

S/Roy Masinton — 6/10/99

Malheur Field Office Manager — Date

## VIII. DECISION RECORD

On the basis of the information provided in this EA (OR-030-99-014) and all other information available, it is my decision to implement the proposed action as described.

S/Roy Masinton — 6/10/99
Malheur Field Office Manager — Date